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Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia

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Birchtown in Shelburne County, Nova Scotia, was founded by Black Loyalists in 1783, reaching a peak population of c. 1,521 in 1786, declining quickly by 1791, when much of the population emigrated to Sierra Leone. While the village is now predominantly non-African-American, its heritage is being protected by the Shelburne County Cultural Awareness Society, led by Elizabeth Cromwell, a descendant of the original settlers.

The greatest threat so far to Birchtown's heritage is the proposal to locate a regional landfill a few kilometers from the village. This threat was the catalyst for a 1993 survey, which resulted in the identification of 22 features in a 4 hectare area. The most significant feature was a late 18th century cellar located just northwest of the village. While I'm convinced the cellar belonged to an original settler, there is no land grant documentation to back this up. I'll be returning to the site on June 27 (our funding was approved last week) as part of a fieldschool run by Dr. S. A. Davis of Saint Mary's University in Halifax. We'll be excavating the 18th century site, surveying the remaining area, and participating in a public awareness program on the African-American heritage of Shelburne County.

While I'm excited to be a part of the preservation of this important aspect of Shelburne's history, I'm disturbed by rumours that non-archaeologists are talking of "exploiting Blacks". Hopefully we'll be able to overcome this kind of thinking.

If you'd like more information on Birchtown or the SCCAS please don't hesitate to ask. I'll be in the field for the next month but my wife will be checking my mail. I look forward to hearing from you.